

Lost in the Sierras

A Short Survival Story

Chapter 1

Brian Williams was an avid snowboarder who lived in Reno, NV. Every winter he would spend his weekends skiing at several different Sierra Nevada ski resorts. He was an advanced snowboarder, who snowboarded most of the expert slopes in the Sierra. His favorite ski resort was Mount Rose, mostly because it was the closest, so he could get a whole day in and be back before dark. He had a very understanding wife who didn't ski, but allowed him to fill his passion for snowboarding. He started out skiing in the 70's and 80's before snowboarding was popular, and an incident where his skis separated and almost broke his leg in the 90's convinced him he would be better off snowboarding. He soon found out it was harder than it looked, but stayed with it, and soon was an advanced snowboarder, who could traverse any terrain inside the ski resort, and perform some basic snowboarding stunts. He loved "getting air" as they called it, but he got zero style points because he looked like a goony bird trying to take off in the air.

Now in his 40's, he had slowed down a little, but still liked to get out a couple of times a month, and he had also gotten a little more careful since they now had 2 beautiful daughters, Tabitha was 10 and Stephanie was 8. He carried their pictures in his wallet, along with his wife. The previous year, a snowboarder he barely knew died at Mount Rose when he got lost skiing out of bounds. Mt. Rose has several areas of very pretty and exciting "back country" skiing areas, but were out of bounds for various reasons. Despite this, several times a year, snowboarders were too tempted to resist, and strayed out of bounds. A small group of snowboarders routinely went to the back country "out of bounds" areas since they were kids and assumed the rules didn't apply to them.

Brian was getting on the chair lift, when a group of teenage "snowboarding monsters" came up behind him, and were talking about their favorite back country route. When they asked if he wanted to go, and said no, they were teasing him, calling him "gramps". Since he felt older than he was sometimes, their remarks stung. When they got to the top, and he looked over the runs - he realized how boring the groomed runs were, and it wouldn't hurt just this time.

Brian decided a few years ago to carry a Fanny pack with some emergency gear. The military canteen on his hip attached to the pack got him teased by the younger skiers as being "GI JOE". Sometimes he felt like leaving it behind, but thought about that snowboarder who was lost for a week with just the clothes on his back, and died.

Brian's fanny pack kit had the following items in it:

Swiss Army Knife w/ Scissors 6 Band-Aids 1 triple antibiotic ointment packet
1 pair Exam Gloves 1 roll medical tape 1 Self-adhesive ACE bandage
2 Large Bandanas 3 4x4 sterile pads 1 travel tube Purell Handwash
6 Benedryl 6 Imodium AD 50 Advil or Tylenol 1 LED light (Photon knock-off)
Pen & Notebook 1 tube Aloe Vera Gel 3 large safety pins 1 Mylar blanket
2 Contractor-grade safety orange trash bags 1 bag of hard candy
4 packs Lipton instant chicken noodle soup Lexan signaling mirror
Fox-40 florescent orange whistle on Paracord lanyard BSA Hot Spark
35mm film can full of PJ saturated cotton balls SAS Wire Saw Box of lifeboat matches
Quad section of Topo Map showing Mount Rose and immediate area
Small compass with declination preset 100 feet of 550 Paracord 6 disposable hand warmers
1 copy "Good News for Modern Man" and a Lexan page magnifier 1 deck of "Survival Cards"

The first Aid kit was in one quart freezer Ziploc bag, the food items were in another, and his firestarting and signaling kit was in another. They all barely fit inside his small fanny pack, with room in the front pocket for his keys wallet, and cellular phone.

On the belt of the kit he carried a 1 qt. Military plastic Canteen w/ cup and stove, a bottle of Polar Pure that fit in the little pouch of the cover, and 2 bars of trioxane fuel that fit nicely between the cup and stove.

This whole kit weighed about 5 pounds, not including the water in the canteen. He had needed the first-aid kit more than once. Once for when he fell and hurt himself, but more often to patch up someone else. The bandaids and ointment got the most use, but the rest of it would come in very handy if he ever needed it. He owned a small Startac digital Cellular phone that was about the size of a large pack of gum. He decided to add that to the front pocket with his keys and wallet

Back on the slopes, Brian gave in to temptation and skidded to a stop next to the kids. He asked them where they were going, and they pointed in a general direction in the out of bounds area. He told them he was unfamiliar with the route, and the oldest one, who appeared about 15 said "No Problem Gramps, just follow us!" and started off down slope into the out of bounds area. Against his better judgment, Brian followed them, and soon was left way behind. He tried to follow their tracks, but evidently this was a popular area, and there were tracks all over the place. He thought he saw their tracks off to the right, and sailed off a 30 foot drop-off and landed in a snowdrift up to his waist. When he awoke, his feet and knees hurt, but other than that, he was OK. He dug himself out of the snowbank, and looked around, and found himself in a box canyon, the huge snowdrift was 12 feet high and 10 feet wide and 8 feet deep. There were several large pine trees nearby, and the boughs of several were still green. There were several downed trees as well. A creek ran through the center of the canyon, but appeared frozen over. The creek disappeared over a cliff 50 feet away, and he didn't dare get close enough to check

the drop-off for fear of slipping on the ice and falling over it. He had over 100 feet of Paracord, but he knew better than to trust it with rappelling down the cliff face, and anyway it was too thin to grip. He had a nice view of the southern half of Washoe Valley, including some frequently traveled roads that were 5-10 miles away.

Brian sat down and thought out his situation, he couldn't go up, and he couldn't go down - he was definitely stuck! It took looking at the picture in his wallet of his wife and daughters to snap him out of his blue funk and do something to improve his chances. First of all, he checked his cell phone - NO SERVICE was what the display said when he turned it on. "Rats, just when I could really use an "ET Phone Home" I'm either out of range of a cell tower, or don't have line of sight. I knew I should have gotten a bigger phone!"

Brian knew that people would be looking for him tonight, since his wife knew to call the Sheriff's Search and Rescue team if he wasn't home an hour after dark. She also knew which resort he was skiing at. Looking at his watch, he realized he had about 4 hours of daylight left, and it was getting cold already. He thought about staying outside with a fire, and then remembered something he read in American Survival Guide about digging a snow cave. He didn't have a shovel, but he did have a snowboard. He checked out the snowbank he had fallen into, and it was plenty big and compacted enough to make a snow cave. Since he needed daylight to make a snow cave, he got down on his hands and knees to get the entrance as low in the snow as possible. He dug a huge opening instead of a small one, because he remembered something about making bricks out of the snow to block up the entrance. It took him several hours to dig out a 7 foot by 4 foot cave, then he smoothed the walls with his gloves, and piled some snow off to the side to make a single bench a couple of inches above the cave floor. Then he broke off some boughs of green pine branches and laid a thick covering over the snow bench to keep him off the snow since he didn't have a sleeping bag. When he finished. He piled and compressed the snow, then cut rectangles out of it, and carefully scooped them up with his snowboard so they were about 6 inches thick. He carefully handled the snow brick, and soon had a wall in front of his cave covering the opening, and up under the lip of the overhanging snow. He let it set for a while and started to build a fire. Problem was the first one was under a tree, and when he got it going, the snow melted and snuffed the fire out. Brian hadn't sworn in quite some time, but made up for it when the fire went out. Looking around, he spotted a small boulder that was mostly free of snow, and fairly flat on top. He swept the snow off the top, and started over. He took out one of his PJ saturated cotton balls, pinched off a section of it, and pulled it until it was 3 times its original size, then set it on the rock. He took the dry branches he found at the dead tree, and built a teepee from the smallest sticks, then struck the BSA Hot Spark repeatedly with the striker, and finally threw a spark into the PJ tinder. It caught immediately, and Brian slowly built up the fire. Brian brought over as much downed wood as he could, and the first thing he did was to take his canteen apart and melt some snow for water. He remembered to pour a bit of water from his canteen into the bottom, or it wouldn't melt, and set it on the rock near the fire. When it melted, he refilled his canteen, then added more snow to the water that was left in the cup and melted more. this time he dropped a peppermint into the water to give it some flavor. When the water was hot enough, he started sipping on it. It didn't

have many calories, but the warmth was appreciated. After a couple of hours, he went to check on the snow cave, and the entrance had frozen shut! "Great, now how am I going to get in there?" he thought. Remembering his Swiss Army Knife, he opened the main blade and stuck it in the snow. It went in fairly easily, and then he tried the saw blade. Once he had made the hole with the blade, he tried sawing the snow, and it worked - kind of! Just before he ran out of daylight, he succeeded in cutting an opening large enough to squeeze through, and unbelted his fanny pack, since he couldn't make it fit in on. He took out his LED light, and a contractor's trash bag. Before he crawled in for the night, he filled the bag full of pine needles, and then slipped the other bag inside it. Instant Sleeping bag! Using his LED light to see, he crawled into the snow cave then slid into the trash bag sleeping bag. While he was cold, he was warm enough to sleep, since the snow cave broke the wind and gave him some insulation. He woke up every now and then but didn't hear anything, so he went back to sleep. He awoke at first light, and crawled out of his snow cave. It was snowing, knocking the visibility down to less than a mile. Knowing that search parties were probably out looking for him, he took his Fox 40 whistle out of his pack, slipped the lanyard around his neck, stuck his fingers in his ears, and blew as loud as he could 3 times, caught his breath, and repeated it twice more. Brian realized he was wearing his Casio watch, with a time reminder alarm. He set the time reminder to go off repeatedly every half hour. He figured every half hour would be frequent enough to attract attention if they were searching in this area. His morale plummeted when he remembered that he was out of bounds, so they wouldn't search here first - he might need to spend a couple of nights on the mountain. He walked over to the downed tree, and snapped off two thick branches that were 4 feet long. He was going to need them if he were to thoroughly explore the canyon. He was hungry now, and had to find something to stretch his food. The thought of eating bugs turned his stomach, but he knew if he got hungrier, that they'd look better. With the two sticks to support and balance, it was easier navigating the canyon. Every half hour, he stopped, plugged his ears and blew his whistle 3 times, then resumed his search. He had a bag of hard candy, about 50 pieces worth, and 4 Lipton Chicken Noodle packets to eat until he was found. Brian realized he needed to drink hot liquids as much as possible to keep his body temperature up, so he needed to reserve the candies for flavoring hot water. He heard that pine needles made a tea rich in vitamin C, but he knew it would taste like turpentine. He wondered if the lower layer of bark of a pine tree was edible and nutritious. He could easily discover whether or not they were edible, but nutritious was anybody's guess. He walked up to a big tree, and took out his SAK and peeled the outer layer of bark off, then scraped the inner layer with his knife. It was kind of pulpy but didn't taste too bad. He hoped it had some calories in it, because it was a lot of work to get to. His search under fallen logs and trees disturbed huge quantities of bugs and worms, but he wasn't that hungry yet - what he wouldn't give for a rabbit or squirrel right now! He noticed a knothole in a tree, and hoping it contained a squirrel, stuck the end of his stick in. It obviously had been abandoned, since he got no reaction. Brian remembered to try every knothole he came to. As the weather cleared, Brian started his fire again, and added green boughs to make a prodigious amount of smoke, hoping that would attract attention. He could see the road again, so he took out his signaling mirror, and started flashing into the valley, hoping someone would see it and report it. He knew he was too far away to be seen from the road unless someone was looking directly at it, but he kept it

up, since getting seen or heard was the only way he was getting out of here. He decided to add mirror flashing to his routine every half hour as long as the visibility held.

When Brian didn't show up at 6:00pm, Sharon thought he might have gone shopping on the way home. By 7:00pm, he was two hours overdue, so she called his cell phone, getting no answer, he called 911, explained the situation, and they forwarded her to Search and Rescue. Since she knew all the right answers including the fact that her husband told her he was skiing, and to call S&R if he was ever not home after skiing by more than an hour past dark, since none of the slopes he skied at had lights. The S&R coordinators first call was to the Mount Rose ski resort. No they had no reports of missing or injured skiers. Yes, the Bronco license plate 1CL BRNC was still in the parking lot. With that, the resort scrambled their ski patrol to do a hasty search for a lost snowboarder. One of the ski patrol members remembered a group of kids had been caught out of bounds and kicked off the mountain, but a 40-year old wouldn't hang with some kids, so they didn't think to check it out. After 2 hours of fruitless searching, the resort called S&R back. No, he was still missing, and the Ski patrol had skied all the runs, looking for downed or lost skiers, and there was no sign of him. Finally, the S&R coordinator sprang into action, calling out his search teams with dogs. They drove to Mount Rose, and met in the parking lot. S&R established a command post, and a communications net. Civilian rescue volunteers were paired with more experienced searchers to double the number of searchers available. They couldn't search from air due to the weather, so they rode the lifts to the top of the mountain, and started a foot search. When a snowstorm rolled in later that night, the coordinator suspended the search since some parts of the mountain were down to almost zero visibility. The next morning, they resumed their search, and someone thought they heard a whistle, but couldn't locate the direction, since the box canyon was causing multiple echoes up on the mountain.

By the end of the first day, frustrated with the lack of results, Sharon appealed to the TV news stations, and several stations ran pictures of the lost snowboarder. For almost an entire day, they got no response. Then finally, the "Snow Monsters" met at their friend's house. They were watching Jerry Springer when the station broke in about a lost snowboarder. They were mad that the station had broken in, because it was just getting to the good part, when they flashed Brian's picture on the screen.

Echo195, as he was known to his snowboarding buddies, was looking at the screen when they flashed Brian's picture. "Hey, isn't that Gramps - I wonder what he did?"

One of the other kids yelled for quiet as the bulletin continued. "Dude - they say he's lost on Mount Rose! He must have followed us after all - I thought he'd chickened out!"

One of the girls suggested telling someone. Echo195 told her "No way - we'd just get in more trouble with the cops for trespassing!"

A couple of hours later, the girl's conscience got the best of her, and she phoned the Sheriff's

office and told them the whole story, including the fact that Gramps might have followed them, and their route down the mountain. This information was relayed to the S&R Coordinator, who called the Base Camp at Mt. Rose and gave them the new info. Immediately half of his searchers started searching in that area, but the snow had erased the tracks.

Brian had got to the point that worms were starting to look good, but he couldn't eat them raw and alive. Then he got the bright idea to add a handful of them to his Lipton chicken and noodle soup, and not look at what he was drinking. He gathered a couple of handfuls of worms, set them on the rock next to the fire, which not only killed them, but they got crunchy. Meanwhile he prepared a packet of soup, and when the water was as hot as he could stand it, added the worms to heat them up. Saying a quick prayer that he wouldn't hurl all this back up, he brought the cup to his mouth, and without looking, swallowed a mouthful. With the chicken flavor and the noodles, he almost didn't notice the worms. A couple of minutes later, he finished the cup of soup, and felt fuller. He resigned himself to spending another night on the mountain, so he got ready for bed when it got dark. He left the fire burning just in case. He crawled into the snow cave, and into his bag, and was asleep soon. He awoke several times that night, but didn't hear anything.

The next morning, Brian couldn't bring himself to eating more worms, so he drank some peppermint candy tea instead. When his watch beeped, he took out his whistle, stuck his fingers in his ears, and blew. After his third time, he heard a loud noise above him, like a snowmobile. He kept blowing and blowing, but it got no closer. Disheartened, Brian thought that the snowmobile's engine was drowning out his whistling. Just to be on the safe side, he blew his whistle 3 times again, and immediately heard a whistle back! Not sure of himself, he repeated the series, and got 1 back. Someone had heard him! He kept blowing 3 times, and waiting for the answering blow. After a couple of hours, the sound of the whistle got closer. Finally after several hours, he heard a human voice yelling his name - BRIAN!!!

"Down Here!" he repeated 3 times, waited a second, and blew his whistle 3 times again.

He kept that up for another 5 minutes until he got 3 whistles back. He answered with a fast staccato burst of whistling. Beep, Beep, Beep <pause> Beep, Beep, Beep <pause> Beep, Beep, Beep!

Brian got 3 answering blasts back. Now he was sure someone had heard him. This time, when he heard the voice yelling his name, it was much closer. Brian yelled again "Down here"!

Finally a voice on a megaphone answered, "Brian Williams, Sheriff's Search and rescue. We'll get you out of there!"

Brian hit his knees in thanks to God!

10 minutes later, a rappelling rope flew over the cliff above him, and a Paramedic rappelled

down to him. He walked over to Brian, who gave him a huge hug. Then he asked Brian, “Are you ok?”

“Yeah, but I could die for a Big Mac!”

The paramedic asked him if he were good enough to climb out on a rope, or if he wanted the Stokes litter, which could take another half hour.

Brian said “Send down the rope and the crampons - I’m ready to get out of here!”

They sent down another rope with a harness and crampons attached. The paramedic showed Brian how to put on the crampons, and attached the climbing harness to him. Brian made sure that he had all his stuff, and looked around, then clipped on to the rope, which was slowly hauled up and he used the crampons to maintain his footing, while he hung onto the rope with his gloved hands. His snowboard was strapped to his back by the paramedic, and they climbed the 30 foot cliff together. When they got to the top, they called the base station, who called the coordinator, who called Sharon to tell her Brian was OK. The paramedic released him since he was in good enough shape to climb up the cliff, and he drove home, but first he stopped at the nearest McDonalds and ordered 6 Big Macs and a large order of French Fries. When he got home, Sharon practically squeezed him so hard he couldn’t breathe, and both of his daughters got into the “group hug”.